

## Eagles earn shot at DMACC for title

Written by Jim Ecker

Thursday, 05 March 2015 23:31 -

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The Kirkwood Eagles desperately wanted a third shot at DMACC this season and now they've got it.

Even before the Eagles knew they'd be playing DMACC on Saturday for a spot in the NJCAA Division II men's national tournament, they insisted they'd rather play DMACC than anyone else in the finals of the Region XI tournament, even if it meant a road trip.

They'd rather get up early Saturday morning, drive two hours to Boone and face the No. 2 team in the country on their floor instead of staying home and playing a lesser team at Johnson Hall.

The eighth-ranked Eagles got their wish Thursday night.

Kirkwood rallied to beat Southwestern, 86-80, in a thriller in the semifinals of the regional tournament and DMACC won a close game against Ellsworth, 78-74, setting the stage for the supreme battle Saturday.

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If Ellsworth had beaten DMACC Thursday, the championship game would have been here.

DMACC beat Kirkwood twice during the regular season, both times in tight contests. The Eagles want revenge, pure and simple. And they want to beat the No. 2 team in the country on its home floor to earn a spot in the national tournament.

"We want DMACC. We absolutely want DMACC," said Matt "Microwave" Lassen, who drilled four clutch 3-pointers during a three-minute span in the second half to fuel Kirkwood's rally from a five-point deficit against Southwestern.

"They got us here by one in overtime, they got us up there (by six). I would rather go and beat the team that beat us twice and cut their nets down," he said. "That game would mean a lot more to us."

Ajay Lawton, who poured in 27 points for Kirkwood, felt exactly the same way.

"We want DMACC," he said, echoing Lassen. "We want DMACC. That's what we all want. They beat us twice this year."

Lassen and Lawton got no argument from Coach Bryan Petersen.

"I agree with them," said Petersen. "They won our conference, they're a very good team, they beat us twice. But we think we're better, and we've got to go prove it. We get one more opportunity to go do that. That's what we wanted."

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It will be No. 8 Kirkwood (25-6) against No. 2 DMACC (25-5) at 3 p.m. in Boone. The winner gets an automatic spot in the national tournament and the loser puts its basketballs away for the year, with no possibility of an at-large berth.



"You know what's crazy about it?," said Lassen, who finished with 22 points. "We haven't played our best game yet. We have the team chemistry, we find a way to get it done, but we know - it's just a feeling we have - we haven't played our best game yet. We have a feeling we're saving it for Saturday."

The Eagles almost didn't make it to Saturday. They trailed 60-55 midway through the second half against Southwestern and things were not going their way. Then Lassen took matters into his own hands.

He made his first 3-pointer of the game with 9:43 left, pulling Kirkwood within 60-58. He hit another to give Kirkwood a 67-64 lead with 8:12 remaining, then another for a 70-64 lead with 7:05 left and another with 6:47 to go for a 73-64 advantage.

That made four 3-pointers in a span of 2 minutes, 56 seconds, with the final three triples coming in a spurt of 85 seconds.

"I got a couple of open looks in the second half and they went down, and then Coach ran a couple of sets for me," said Lassen, a sophomore from Linn-Mar. "They kept falling and the crowd was into it. That's what

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shooters do, I guess.

"That's a lot of fun," he confessed. "Once a couple go down, the hoop keeps getting bigger and bigger. Especially with the crowd like that. That crowd was huge for us."

Lassen appreciated Petersen calling his number with the season hanging in the balance. "That gives me an extra boost of confidence, because Coach knows they're going in," he said. "He didn't hesitate to call them."

Lassen's heroics were a big part of an 18-4 spurt that turned a five-point deficit into a nine-point lead, but Southwestern (22-10) was far from down. The visitors clawed back within 77-76 with 2:10 left on a bucket by long-armed Jok Kut.

Lassen responded with a driving layup to make it 79-76. Both teams committed turnovers, then Southwestern missed a shot and Kirkwood grabbed the rebound with 66 seconds left.

Lawton made two free throws with 42.2 seconds remaining for an 81-76 edge, but Southwestern pulled back within 81-80 with 26 seconds left. Southwestern needed to foul to prolong the game, and the Eagles got some lucky bounces at the free throw line.

Joe Tagarelli's first foul shot with 18 seconds left bounced high off the rim, but it came down through the basket on the front end of a one-and-one. "I almost had a heart attack," he said.

His second free throw was clean for an 83-80 lead.

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Kirkwood caught a break when Jaylon Smith of Southwestern tripped on the offensive end of the floor and committed a turnover. Southwestern fouled Ron Singleton with 10.7 seconds left and the same scenario took place.

Singleton banged his first foul shot off the rim, but it bounced up and back through. His second shot was clean for an 85-80 advantage.

Smith missed a 3-pointer and Jordan Ashton hit one free throw with 1.7 seconds left to finish the scoring.

"It was a good win for us," said Petersen. "Obviously it wasn't our best effort, but we found a way. That's what you have to do in March.

"Matt Lassen stepped up big-time, Ajay Lawton stepped up big-time in that second half during the run. And we had some sophs seal the deal. Tags stepped up and hit some free throws. So did Ron Singleton when we needed them to go in."

Tagarelli finished with 16 points. Ashton scored 11. Lawton made five 3-pointers.

Kut led Southwestern with 22.

Kirkwood found a way to win even though Southwestern made 60.4 percent of its shots and won the rebound battle, 35-28. Kirkwood won the game with more 3-pointers (10 to 7), more free throws (14 to 9) and better care of the ball. Southwestern committed 20 turnovers, compared to only five for the home team.

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SOUTHWESTERN (80): Newsome 2 5-5 9, Smith 6 0-0 14, Koyamainvure 2 1-4 5, Kut 10 1-3 22, Bower 4 0-0 10, Tolbert 3 0-0 8, Mason 0 0-0 0, Kirk 4 2-4 10, Joseph 1 0-0 2. Totals 32 9-16 80.

KIRKWOOD (86): Singleton 0 2-2 2, Lawton 9 4-4 27, Lassen 9 0-0 22, Ashton 4 3-5 11, Tagarelli 6 4-4 16, Rhodes 1 0-0 3, Olson 0 0-0 0, Martin 2 1-2 5, Ukah 0 0-0 0. Totals 31 14-17 86.

Halftime - Kirkwood 38, Southwestern 33. 3-point goals - Southwestern 7 (Smith 2, Bower 2, Tolbert 2, Kut 1), Kirkwood 10 (Lawton 5, Lassen 4, Rhodes 1).